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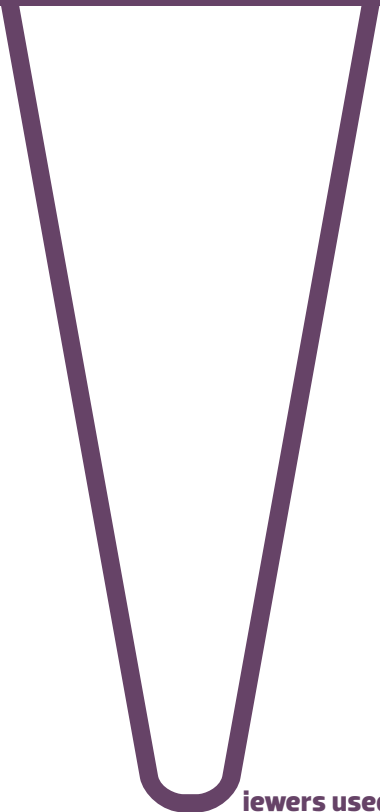


TRUTH

BY **ANN FARMER**

SINCE FACING UP TO PARKINSON'S, **MICHAEL J. FOX** IS REVELING IN ROLES THAT RING TRUE TO HIS NEW SELF.





iewers used to associate actor Michael J. Fox with sunny, appealing, nice-guy roles. His indelible characters — like Alex P. Keaton on NBC's *Family Ties* and Mike Flaherty on ABC's *Spin City* — largely carried the shows, moving the action along in a torrent of comedic repartee and nimble physicality.

Not long after announcing in 1998 that he'd been diagnosed with the neurological disorder Parkinson's, Fox retired from being the little engine that could. But in guest-star appearances, Fox has proved he can be just as riveting playing dark, quirky and inscrutable types.

"I think he was brilliant then, and I think he's brilliant now," says Julianna Margulies, who faced off opposite Fox this past season in CBS's *The Good Wife*. In July he got a Primetime Emmy nomination for his portrayal of the wily and cynical Louis Canning, an attorney afflicted with a neurological condition that he exploits to sway jurors and potential clients.

On NBC's *Scrubs* in 2004 he was praised for humorously depicting an eccentric surgeon with obsessive-compulsive disorder. In 2006 Fox was Emmy-nominated for his recurring role on ABC's *Boston Legal*, a CEO with lung cancer who manipulates a drug trial to ensure that he doesn't get a placebo. Three years later, Fox won an Emmy for his guest shot on FX's drama *Rescue Me*, even though that part gave him the most pause.

"I had a moment," says Fox, recalling when his good friend Denis Leary — co-creator, executive producer and star of the series — called him with a season-five offer of Dwight, a sour, alcohol- and drug-abusing misanthrope who's saddled to a wheelchair after an accident leaves him a paraplegic.

"I asked Denis," Fox continues, "'What made you think of me when you came up with this completely bitter asshole? And you're aware that he's paralyzed and that I can't stop moving.' He said, 'Yeah, it'll be great. Don't worry about it.'"

Fox didn't. And his ribald and uninhibited portrayal of Dwight required Leary, who plays troubled firefighter Tommy Gavin, to bite his lip during scenes together to keep from cracking up.

"He was so committed. He was so out of his mind as Dwight," says Leary, recalling that on the first day of production, when Fox's disheveled character chugs beers while ranting that his paralyzed condition doesn't stop him from having hot sex with Tommy's ex-wife, the crew didn't know what to make of him.

"He brought a lot of stuff to this character," Leary says. "He was a little bit scary. The guys in the crew were like, 'Whoa, is this the real Michael J. Fox? Who is he?'"

Fox is actually nothing like Dwight. "Dwight was a guy who played the result," Fox says. "He played the defeat. For me, it was really interesting to explore that choice — which I didn't make. I chose to embrace life and to move forward and to allow my losses to become opportunities for gains." Playing Dwight, he adds, "was like playing the shadow."

While he speaks, Fox — who would turn fifty the next day, on June 9 — sits wearing khaki shorts and a T-shirt in a hotel suite on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, where he holds board meetings for the Michael J. Fox Foundation, which he created to help find a cure for Parkinson's. His limbs initially move restlessly and unceasingly. But after his Parkinson's medication kicks in, they calm, providing him temporary peace.

Without the drugs, he says, "It's like having a three-year-old constantly pulling on your pant leg."

Fox has lived in New York for twenty-one years but was born in Canada. His dad served in the military and his mom worked as a payroll clerk. He credits his jocular family for sharpening his sense of timing.

"If you wanted to be heard at the dinner table, you had to pick your spots and make it pithy and make it worth hearing." That way, he says, "you could rule the table for that couple of minutes."

While acting in local theater and Canadian television as a teenager, his avocation morphed into an irresistible calling. "I had this feeling that I had broader horizons," says Fox, who quit high school at eighteen to make a bee-line for Hollywood.

When he said goodbye to a favorite social studies teacher, Fox recalls, "He looked at me rather grimly and said, 'You're not going to be cute forever, Fox.' I didn't know what to say. So I said, 'Well, maybe just long enough, sir. Maybe just long enough.' And it turns out, we were both right."

Within a few years, he'd landed the role of the square Republican son in *Family Ties*. Despite the reservations of NBC chief Brandon Tartikoff that Fox was too short to match the actors playing his hip parents (Michael Gross and Meredith Baxter), he quickly won over audiences. After a few episodes he became the series' linchpin, winning three Emmys (out of five nominations) for his adorable stuffed-shirt persona.

In the midst of the show's seven seasons, he wedged in the role of Marty McFly in the blockbuster movie *Back to the Future* (there would be two sequels); as *Family Ties* neared its end, he married actress Tracy Pollan, who played his girlfriend (the couple has four children).

In 1990, while acting in a string of films, Fox noticed that the pinky finger on his left hand kept twitching. The next year, at age thirty, he was diagnosed with early-onset Parkinson's. He concealed the news for seven more years, partly out of concern that audiences wouldn't feel comfortable laughing at his characters knowing he was ill.

"I was trying to work it out," says Fox, who took on the mantle of *Spin City* in 1996, for which he won another Emmy and was nominated four times. Though he could still pull off some of the spry athleticism that defined his early acting style — in the pilot, he pulls his pants down while somersaulting across a bed — he also became preoccupied with keeping his hand still. He'd frequently handle props or thrust his hand in his pocket during closeups.

It got to the point where he could no longer hide his tremors.

"People make their own guesses or you can tell them," he says. It's been an enormous relief to let go of his vanity. "Once we accept it, we move on. And that's a great gift, to not worry if I look funny."

Fox left *Spin City* in 2000 to focus on the Michael J. Fox Foundation, which serves as an international clearinghouse for research funding that's primarily used to develop better treatments for people living with Parkinson's and to speed up a cure. What he didn't expect was all the hoopla surrounding his announcement. As a much beloved television and film celebrity, he was thrust into a new role as the unofficial poster boy for Parkinson's.

"And what a responsibility and privilege that was," Fox says. "No one elected me to be the spokesperson for the Parkinson's community and I don't assume that." But his familiarity with audiences has enabled him to help educate the public about the condition and reduce its stigma. "I saw it as an opportunity to represent something in that way," he says.

Lately, with his foundation solidly on track and his kids growing up, he's found his acting muse wooing him more urgently. "I love acting. That's what I've taught myself to do my whole life. I've learned from some real masters, and I have a responsibility to follow it through."

He's not sure if it's due to the particular drug cocktail he's taking or some deeper adaptation to his symptoms, but despite his loss of physical subtlety, acting has become easier in recent years.

"I don't have the elasticity of expression," he says. "I don't have a lot of tools that I used to use. But other things have come into those spaces. I have a stillness now in spite of the motion. I have a kind of internal gravitas and perspective that makes me as an actor consider my reactions and consider my course through a scene in a way that I wouldn't have previously."

Margulies, of *The Good Wife*, says she loves working with Fox, whose nuanced character always leaves hers — attorney Alicia Florrick — guessing.

"The character he plays is written on the page as incredibly deceptive and smarmy," she says, "but the way he plays it is completely opposite that. Every time we finish an episode, it's me standing there — my character standing there — with a 'Wait, what just happened?' look on her face. Because she's

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never quite sure, did he just get her? Or is he for real?"

Margulies has high hopes that Fox will return to her series in the new season. Denis Leary similarly can't wait to get his hands on him again. "I think his most interesting work is about to happen," he says.

Meanwhile Fox is appearing as himself in the new season of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. In a September episode, he plays the upstairs neighbor of Larry David — creator, executive producer and star — who's moved to New York in the series. Fox's Parkinson's condition becomes a blatant plot device; David, ever the narcissist, believes Fox is using his symptoms to launch a passive-aggressive assault.

"I spill a drink, or I shake, or any symptom I show, is about him, is personally directed at him," Fox explains. "So that was fun because I really play it up. My character, my alter ego, my other me, decides that he doesn't give a shit and decides to just make his life miserable."

Fox often says Parkinson's is a gift. "It's the gift that keeps on taking," he says, chuckling, "but it has been a gift."

For one thing, it's allowed him to get back to acting without the burden of playing the leading man. "Now I get to play these between-the-cracks guys," he says, "that don't have the onus of carrying the guise of affection or being the rooting interest. But to explore the vagaries of what we take to be a good guy or a hero character is really great."

"I've found the space in it to be an actor," he adds, "to be the actor that I want to be. I don't have to compromise. I have to acknowledge it. I have to face the truth. You have to face the truth of everything. But in facing it, that truth is not so daunting that it can't be met with something else." ©